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Best

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[54] TALKING VIDEO GAMES

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[*] Notice: The portion of the term of this patent subsequent to Oct. 25, 2011 has been disclaimed.

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Related U.S. Application Data

[63] Continuation-in-part of Ser. No. 614,843, Nov. 14, 1990, abandoned.

[51] Int. Cl.⁶ A63F 9/22

[52] U.S. Cl. 273/434

[58] Field of Search 273/434, 435, 437, 438, 273/DIG. 28, 85 G

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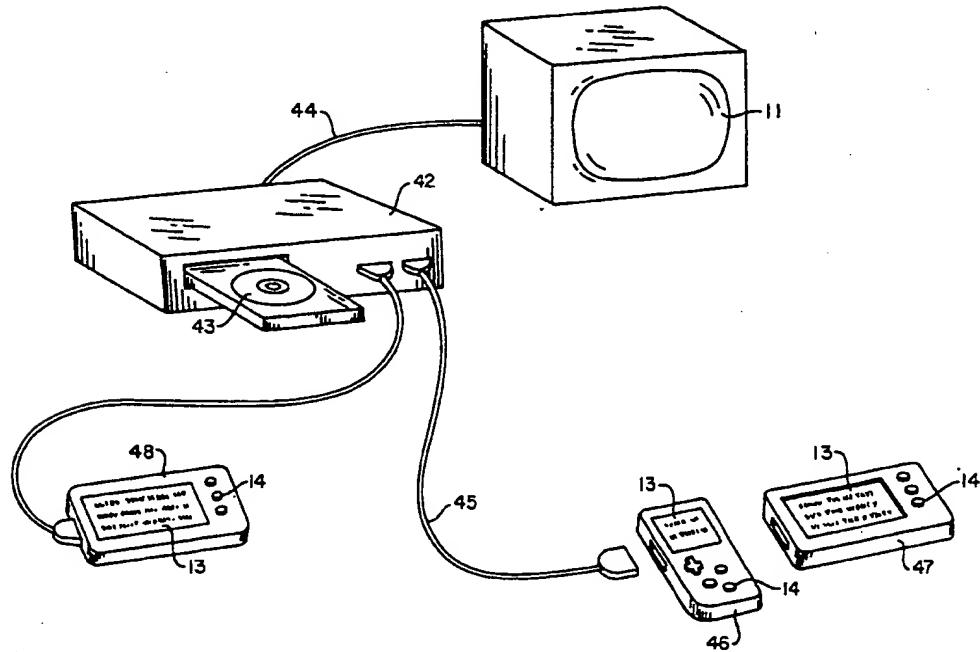
Primary Examiner—Jessica J. Harrison

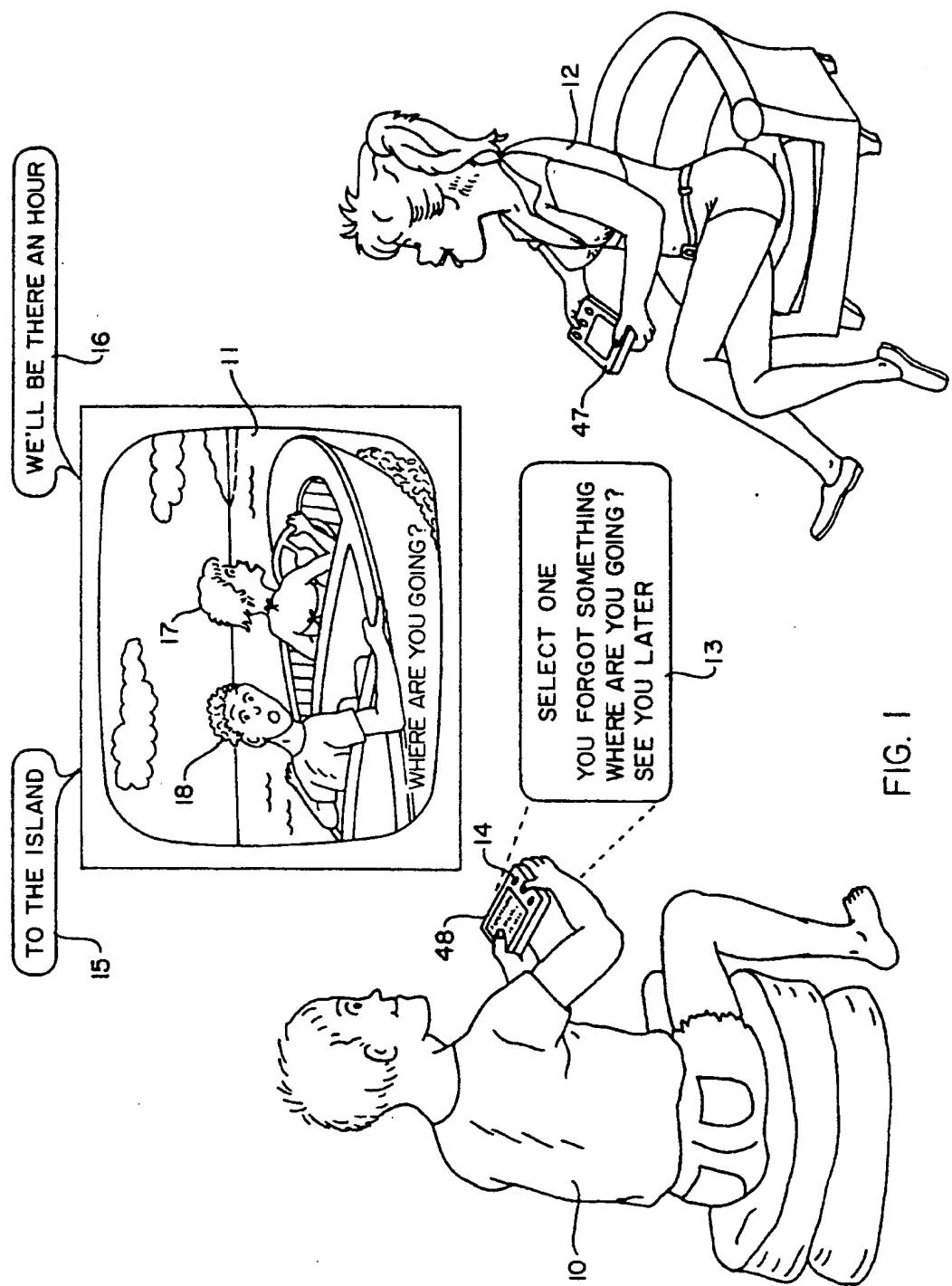
Attorney, Agent, or Firm—Graybeal, Jackson, Haley & Johnson

[57] ABSTRACT

Talking video games can provide simulated voice dialog between human players and animated characters on a TV screen. Two or more players can take turns responding to animated characters and two or more animated characters can respond to each player and to each other, thereby providing three-way or four-way conversations. Pictures and voices are generated from digital data separately stored on a laser-readable disk such as a CD-ROM in compressed form. As the game is played each animated character talks to the human game players and waits for a response. Each player has a hand-held controller that displays two or more phrases or sentences and a player responds by pressing a button next to a selected phrase. An animated character then responds to the selected phrase as if it had been spoken by the human player. Speech recognition is not required. Each scene branches to two or more subsequent scenes. But within each scene there are several branching dialog sequences, thereby providing a large variety of possible dialogs. Human game players are thus given an illusion of having dialogs with interesting people, either living, historical or imaginary and with animal-like characters on a TV screen as an active participant in adventures and dramas with these characters.

4 Claims, 10 Drawing Sheets





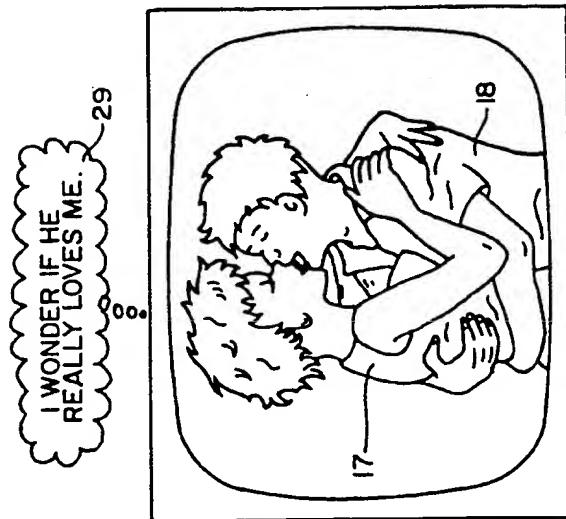


FIG. 3

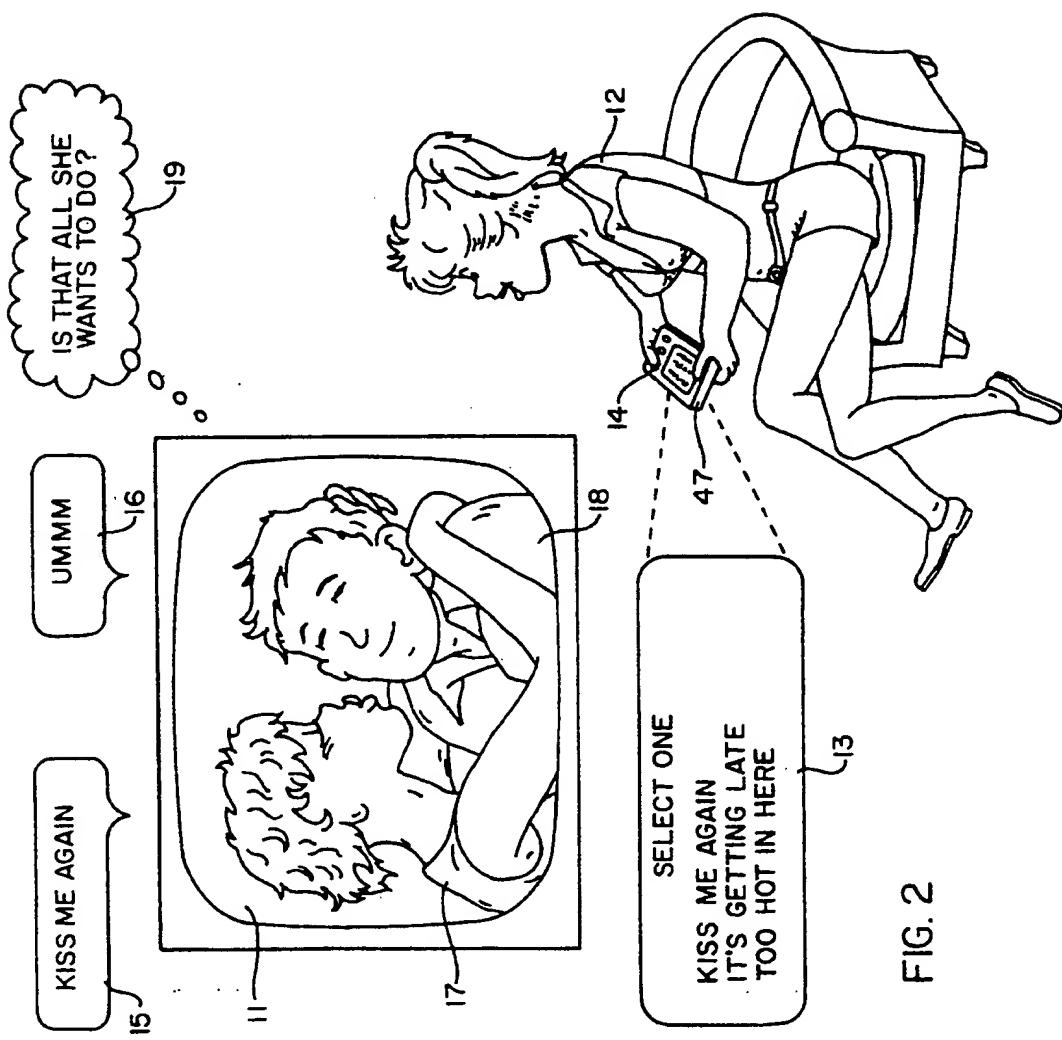


FIG. 2

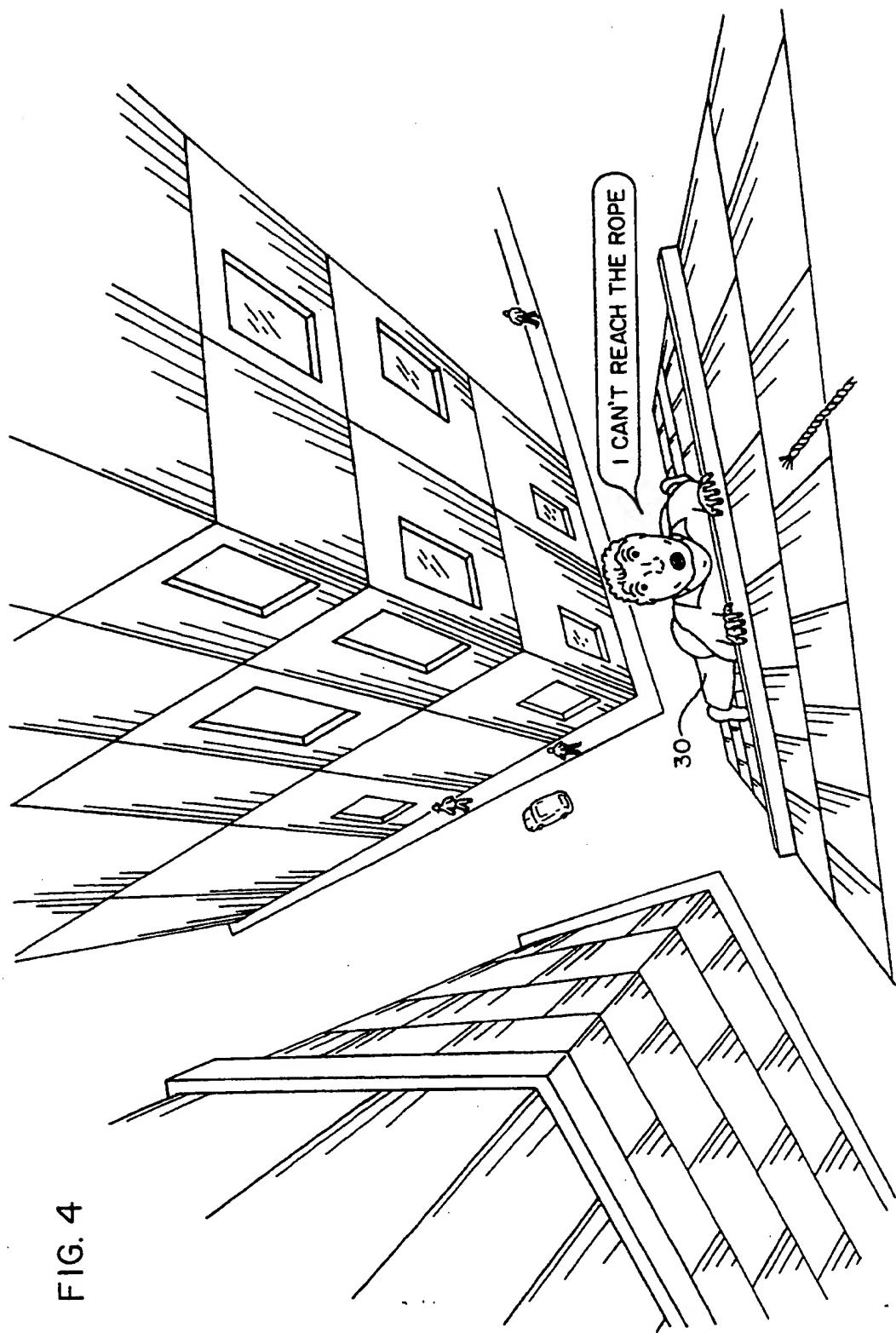


FIG. 4

FIG. 5

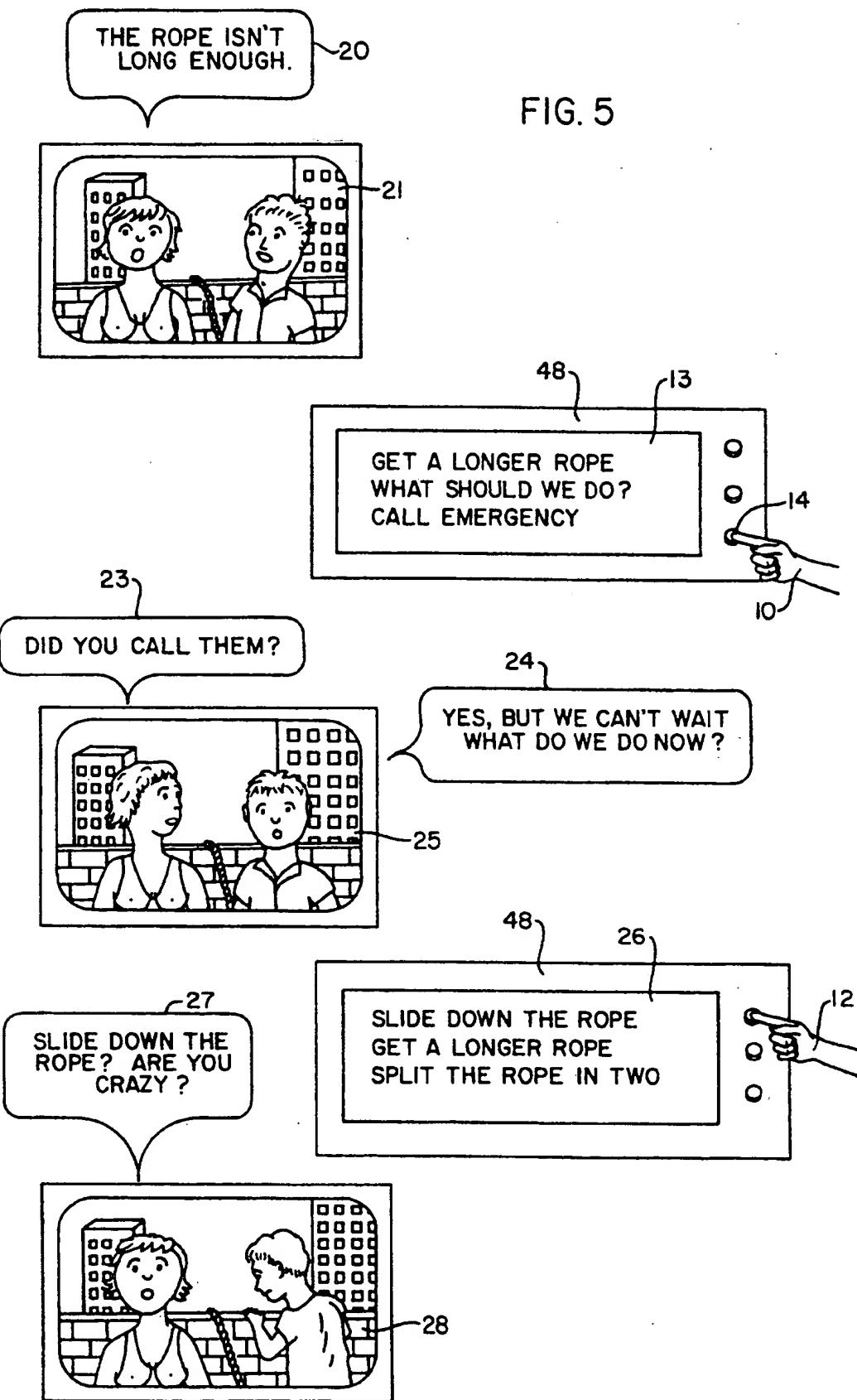


FIG. 6

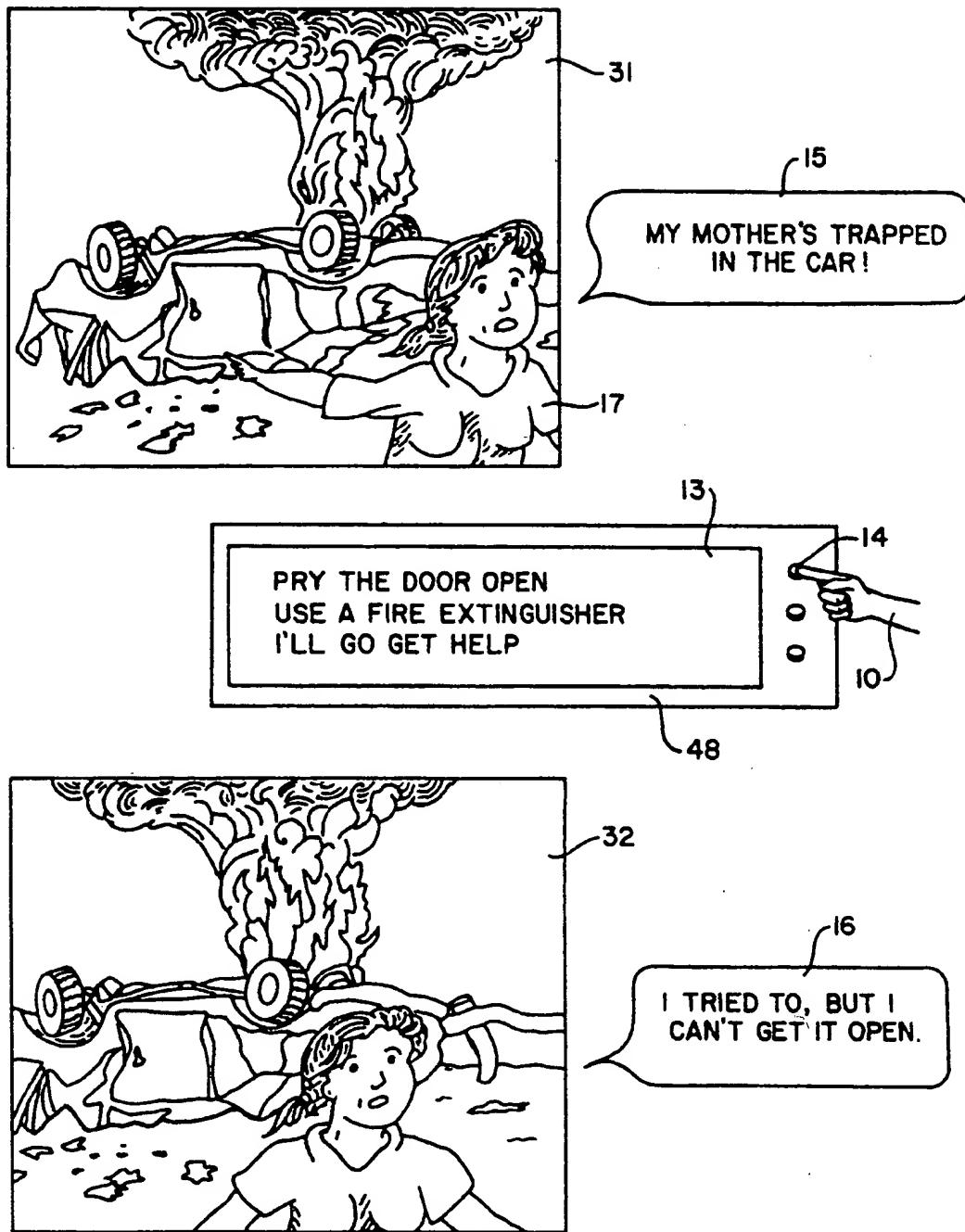


FIG. 7

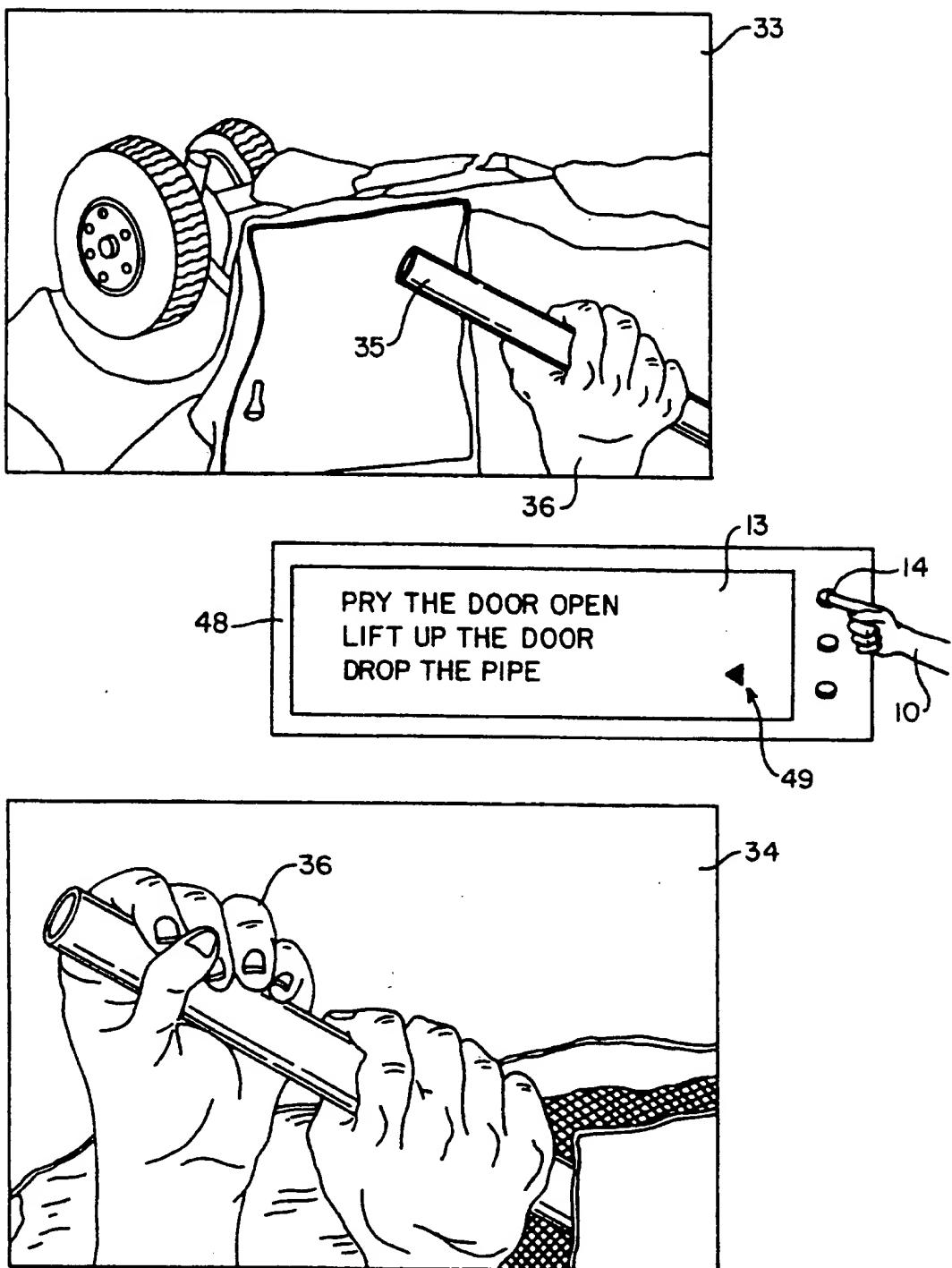
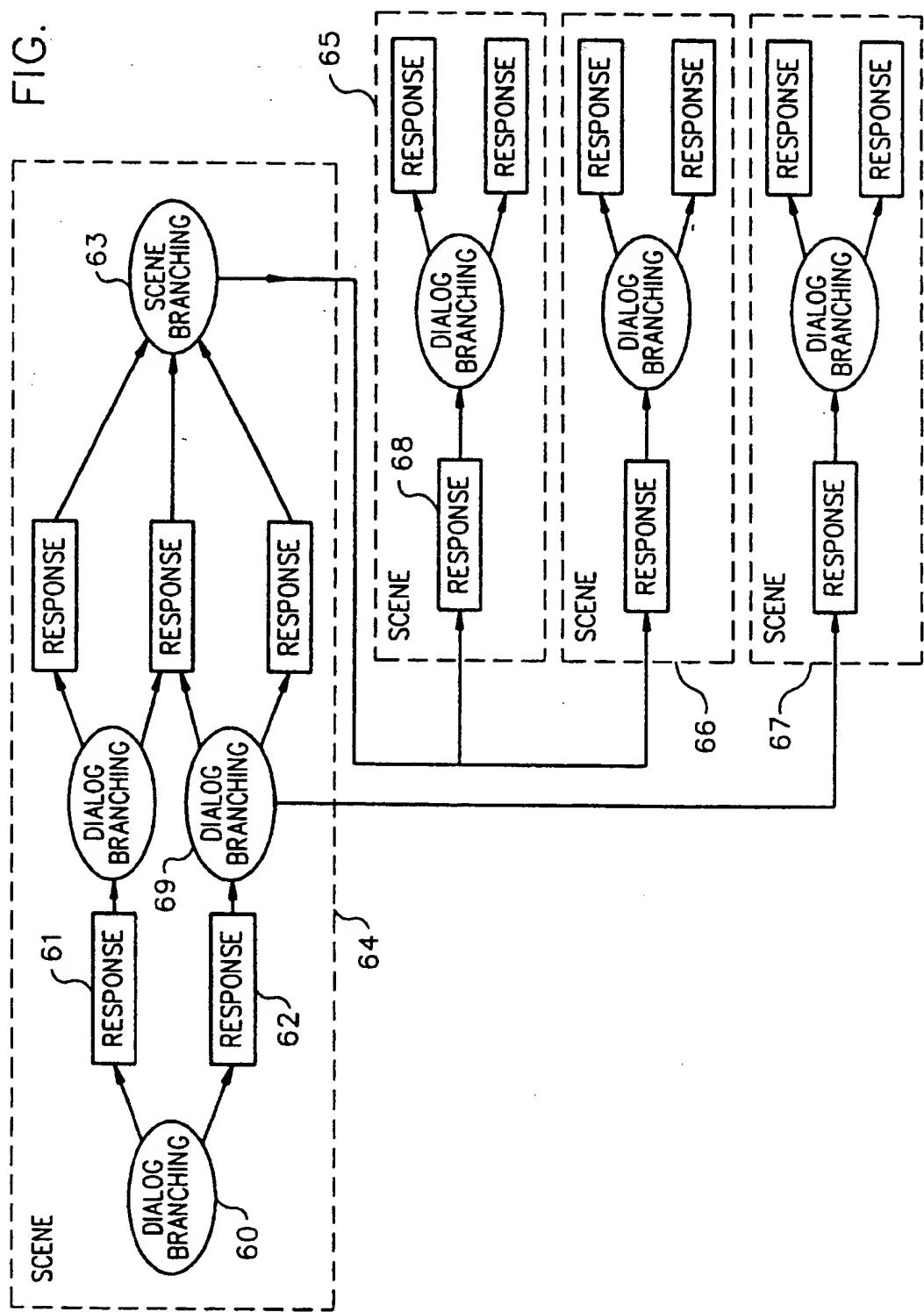


FIG. 8



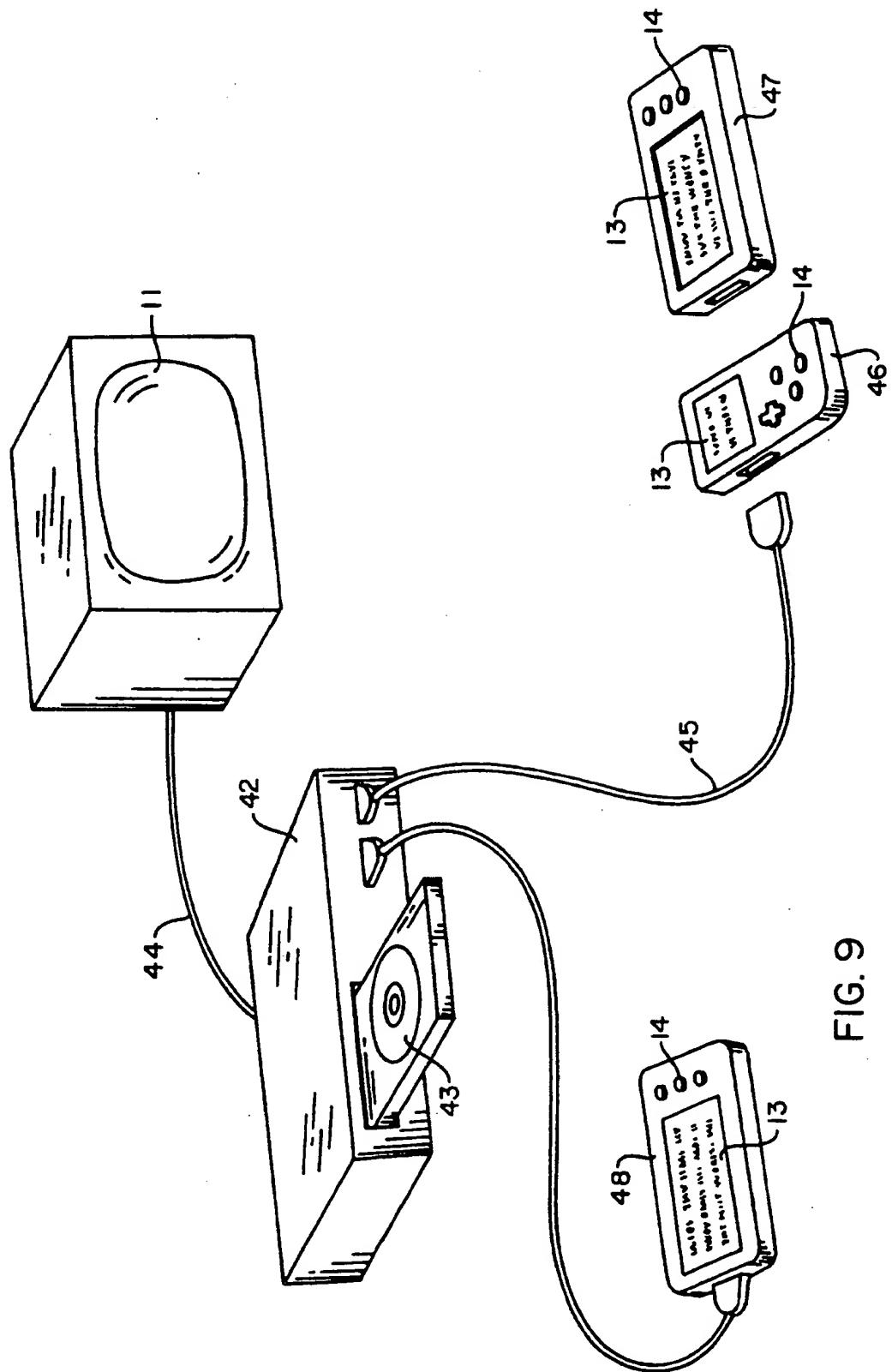


FIG. 9

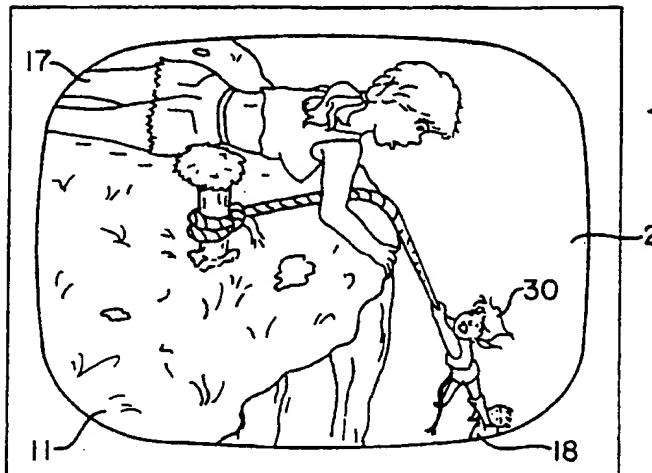
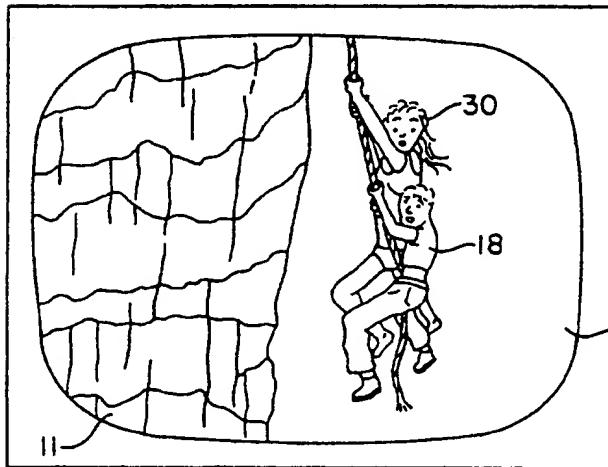
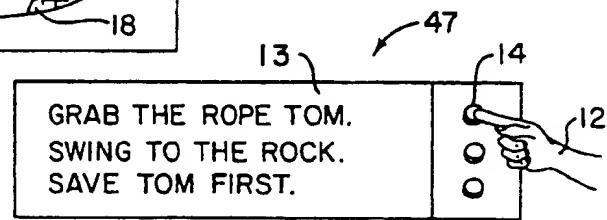
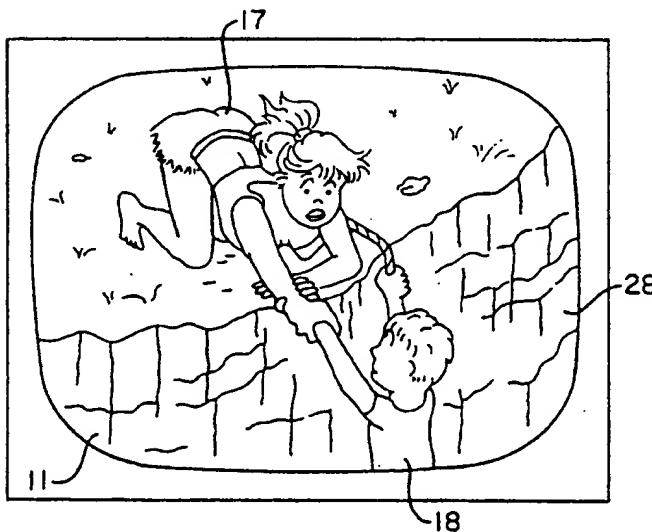


FIG. 10



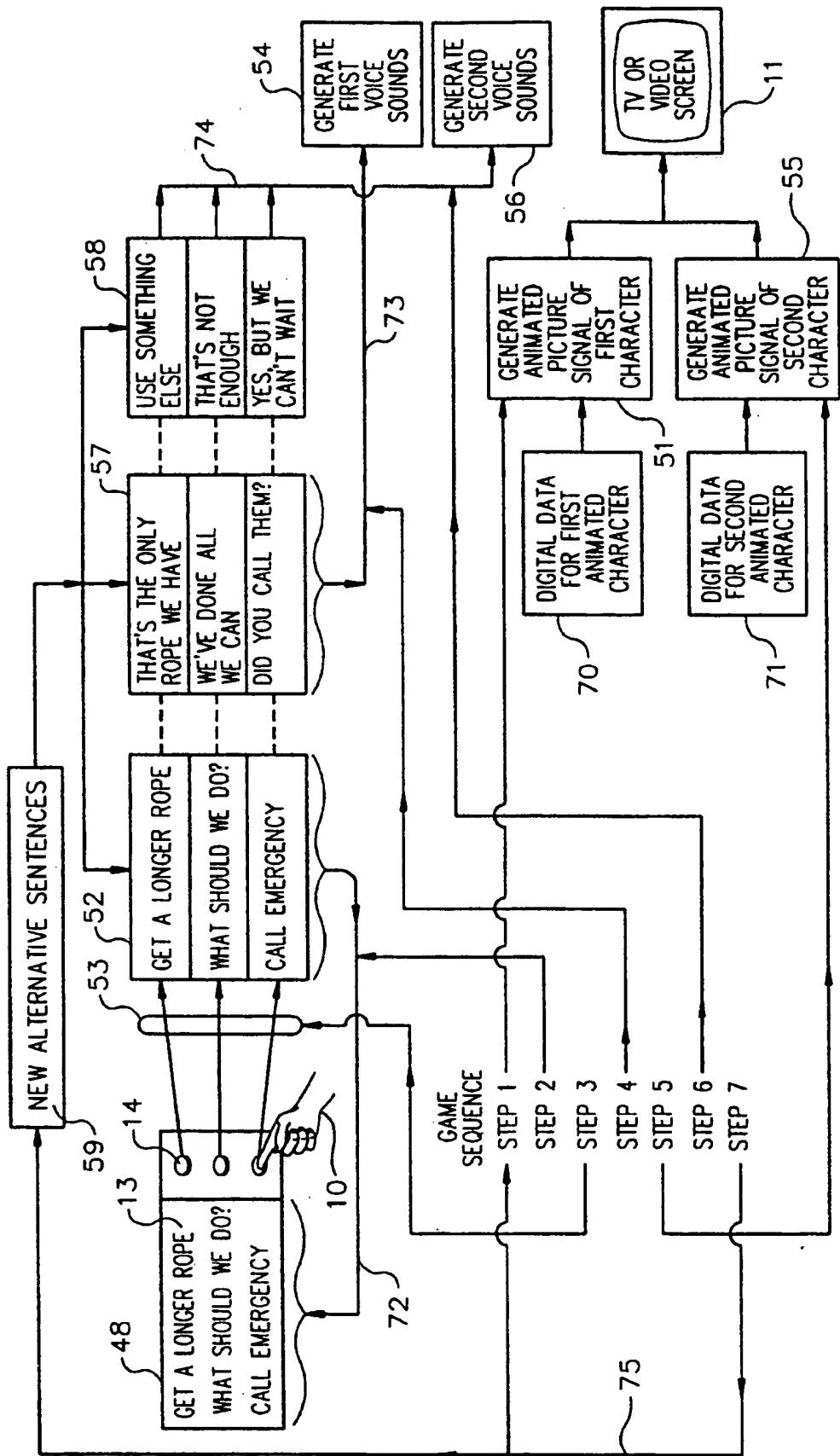
GRAB THE ROPE TOM
23

I'VE GOT IT
24



HOLD MY ARM
27

FIG. 11



TALKING VIDEO GAMES

CROSS REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATION

This is a continuation-in-part of U.S. patent application Ser. No. 07/614,843, filed Nov. 14, 1990, abandoned in favor of continuation application Ser. No. 08/140,266, filed Oct. 21, 1993, pending.

TECHNICAL FIELD OF THE INVENTION

This invention relates to video games, animated cartoons, and picture/sound synchronization.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

We are all born with a desire to talk and to be talked to. Most of us find talking a pleasant experience and we do it more often for pleasure than for necessity. Listening to other people talk and thereby sharing their emotional experiences is also a desire we are born with and this desire has been exploited in motion picture film and television in which voice sounds are now essential. But until recently, voice sounds were seldom used in video games or were used as an optional gimmick to add a little realism to the game, rather than to simulate dialog. The large amount of memory required for good quality voice sounds has made voice impractical for home video games, until recently. But now lower memory prices and digital disks such as the CD-ROM and compression techniques have made talking video games 30 practical.

But adding voice sounds to conventional video games is not enough to simulate a face to face voice conversation. A talking video game called Thayer's Quest was attempted in 1984 and was played from an analog laser-readable video disc. One of the reasons for the commercial failure of Thayer's Quest was that each spoken sentence was programmed to accompany only one sequence of video frames. Since the video was not compressed, the maximum amount of play time was limited 40 to about half an hour which was further reduced to a fraction of that by the branching story. Hence, only a few minutes of voice sounds were actually heard during the game. Whenever a human player saw a certain video character, the character always spoke the same 45 words. This greatly reduced the entertainment value of the game. Another consequence of programming the audio and video to be inseparable, was that branching scenes were not distinguished from branching dialog. Human players were able to navigate through a maze of roads, but the game play did not feel like a conversational dialog. It was more like "Which road do you want to take next: (1) or (2) or (3)? Make your selection." Talking video games will be much more entertaining if each scene has a rich variety of possible dialog 55 sequences.

Talking video games are disclosed in my U.S. Pat. Nos. 4,305,131; 4,333,152; 4,445,187 and 4,569,026.

Another problem in the prior art is how to prevent a combinatorial explosion, i.e. an exponential increase of 60 scenes if each branch branches, and each of those branch, etc. If branches did not merge or loop, the limited amount of bytes on the CD-ROM would be quickly exhausted after less than a dozen branches. Branches should usually merge with other branches or 65 loop back to prior scenes. But this does not mean that repeated scenes should play exactly the same each time. Each time a scene is repeated there should be different

dialog and/or different characters. Successful games of the past have made use of a rich variety of possible plays against a simple repetitive background. Chess has been popular for centuries with only a very basic checkered background. Pac-Man did quite well even though it had only a simple background maze. Recent video games also make use of a repetitive background. The reason these games have high play value is the large variety of possible plays and sequences of plays in each situation.

10 And so it should be with talking video games.

It is common practice in the video game art for stories to branch. It is also common practice for digital data of animated characters to be stored separately from background scenery and to generate each frame of an animated picture from both the background data and the character data to minimize the number of stored images.

15 It is well known for human players to input choices using any of a variety of input devices such as push buttons, rotatable knobs, pressure sensitive membrane, proximity sensitive pads or screen overlay, light pen, light sensitive gun, joy stick, mouse, track ball, moving a cursor or crosshairs or scrolling through highlighted options, speech recognition, etc.

20 In the prior art, each choice by the human can be immediately followed by a synthesized voice or digitized voice recording that speaks the words selected by the human player, so the human will quickly adjust to the fact that the spoken words he hears for his side of the dialog are initiated by his fingers rather than his vocal cords.

25 The characters in video games and computer games, especially role-playing games, are of two types: player-controlled characters (or player characters) and non-player characters. A player-controlled character is a human player's animated surrogate or proxy and does what the human player chooses to have him do. Non-player characters are not directly controlled by a human player, but can be indirectly influenced by a human player, either by responding to input from a human player or by responding to what a player-controlled character does or says.

30 The prior art also includes methods for generating video images of moving lips and facial expressions on a talking head or other animated character. See for example, U.S. Pat. No. 4,884,972 issued Dec. 5, 1989 to Elon Gasper who contemplates use in video games.

35 The film and television industries already address the human desire to watch and listen to important and interesting people. But there is also a basic human desire that people respond to us as individuals. No industry yet satisfies this desire that important people reply to us as individuals. Although the telephone provides a partial satisfaction of our desire to talk with other people, it is necessarily limited to living people who are willing to talk with us. Historical and imaginary people cannot talk with us and famous living people don't want to. Hence, there is a strong but unfulfilled human desire waiting to be satisfied by new technology.

Often an illusion is as satisfying as a real experience, as any TV viewer knows. When you watch people on TV, what you are actually watching are little flickering dots of colored light from a chemically coated sheet of glass. The voice sounds you hear are from a vibrating cone of paper. That is reality. The rest of your experience is illusion. But it is an illusion that everyone wants to experience and will gladly pay money for. The desire

to talk with interesting, charismatic and famous people is also strong and millions of people will be satisfied with an illusion of such conversations.

Talking video games (talkies) will change the nature of video games as dramatically as talking pictures changed silent film. Talkies will let users chat with images of famous people (living or historical or imaginary) and with animal-like characters, and participate in simulated adventures and dramas with interesting characters who talk to each player responsively. The conversations will be one-sided, of course, with the on-screen characters doing most of the talking. But talkies that stir human emotions like dramatic films will have lasting appeal, because they will satisfy a basic human desire, the desire to talk with other people.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

This is a video game which takes the form of a branching story that simulates dialog between two or more animated characters on a TV screen and two or more human game players, thus simulating three-way or four-way dialog. Branching is of two kinds: scene branching that results from a selected-action or a change from one character to another and dialog branching within each scene.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 1 illustrates an animated cartoon talking game with two human players who take turns selecting words to say to one or two animated characters on a TV screen who then respond to the words. Subtitles on the TV screen tell each player what is being said by the other player.

FIG. 2 illustrates an animated talking game with one human player and two animated cartoon characters on a TV screen who talk to the human and to each other.

FIG. 3 is an animated cartoon illustrating a kissing scene in which one character's unspoken thoughts are sounded.

FIG. 4 is an animated cartoon illustrating a ledge-hanging scene in which a talking cartoon character requires immediate action by the human player.

FIG. 5 is an animated sequence illustrating branching dialog in which two cartoon characters respond to sentences selected by a human player by talking to the human player and to each other.

FIG. 6 is an animated sequence illustrating branching dialog in which one animated character responds to a sentence selected by a human player and refers to a second character (not shown).

FIG. 7 is an animated sequence showing hands simulating the hands of a human player performing an action.

FIG. 8 is a flow diagram illustrating scene branching and dialog branching within each scene.

FIG. 9 is a pictorial view of a video game system having a CD-ROM disc drive connected to a televison or video monitor with auxiliary devices for displaying prompting words.

FIG. 10 is an animated sequence illustrating both dialog branching and scene branching in which one character is shown helping the other two characters get out of a dangerous situation.

FIG. 11 is an apparatus block diagram illustrating flow of data and method steps to generate a cyclical game play with two animated characters.

EXAMPLES OF GAME DIALOG

Each scene branches to two or more subsequent scenes, but there is also a second level of branching dialog within each scene. Referring to FIG. 6 as an example:

The animated character looks at you anxiously from the TV screen. In the background is a burning car. The character yells to you "My mother's trapped in the car. I can't get her out. She's going to die." You the player can choose either:

- (1) "I've got a fire extinguisher in my car. I'll get it."
- or
- (2) "I've got a chain in my car. We can pull the door off."

Either way the character replys "Ok, but do it quick!" and a few seconds later yells "Faster! Faster! Do something!"

Then, depending on your selection, the character is shown using a fire extinguisher or using a chain to pull the car door open. Or (see FIG. 7) hands reach up from the bottom of the TV screen to simulate the hands of a human player helping the animated character.

The next time you encounter this situation the character has been modified to seem like a different person. His/her personality is different. His/her voice and face are different (chosen by the system from a catalog of voices and faces). The burning car is a different color. And the dialog has changed. The character cries "Please help me. There's a little boy trapped in the car. I can't get the door open." You can choose either:

- (1) "Loop this chain through the door. I'll hook it to my car." or
- (2) "Use this pipe to pry the door open."

Either way the character yells "Hold on. We'll get you out!"

Then, depending on your selection, the character is shown using a pipe or chain to pull open the car door. In either case the fire flares up and the character yells: "It's not working. Do something! Do something!" You can choose to say:

- (1) "Keep trying. It's almost open." or
- (2) "It's stuck. Pull harder—Harder!" or
- (3) "Too late. It's going to explode."

Note that there are two kinds of branching in each of the above sequences. The plea for help scene branches to the fire extinguisher scene or the pipe scene. But there is also branching in the dialog within each scene. Dialog branching does not require different animation data except in mouth and body movements, but it adds intimate involvement in the dialog that scene branching cannot provide. If each scene has a rich dialog it requires much less video data than if each dialog branch required different video data.

Repeatedly showing the same background and characters with different dialog will expand the limited capacity of a CD-ROM disk into a large number of different story lines. Having the same background appear again and again is acceptable if a variety of talking characters do and say different things against that background.

For a human player to know how to respond, the alternative choices can be communicated to him in different ways:

1. by displaying a menu of words or phrases or icons, either on the TV screen or on an auxiliary display, giving alternative things to say to a non-player

character or alternative things a player-controlled character will say;

2. by a talking character giving the alternatives verbally, by asking a question or by suggesting alternatives;
3. by a talking character showing the alternatives by holding a chain in one hand and a prybar in the other, for example;
4. by one talking character making a remark to a second talking character (either on-screen or off-screen);

A simulated voice dialog within each scene that does not require speech recognition can be of several different kinds:

1. spoken voice from animated character, then push-button response from player, then voice from animated character responding as if he had been spoken to;
2. spoken voice from animated character, then push-button response from player, then voice response from game (in a different voice) to simulate the player's side of the conversation, then voice from animated character responding as if he had been spoken to;
3. spoken voice from animated character, then push-button response from player, then voice from one animated character talking to a second animated character in the same scene responding to the push-button response;
4. spoken voice from first animated character speaking to a second animated character, then push-button response from player, then voice from the second character speaking the words selected by the player or responding to them;
5. spoken voice from animated character, then push-button response from a first player, then echo voice from the game system (in a voice different from character) so that a second player can hear what the first player has "said", then voice from the animated character responding to the first player's input, then push-button response from a second player, then echo voice response from game to simulate second player's side of the conversation so that the first player can hear what the second player has "said";
6. spoken voice from animated character, then push-button response from a first player, then sub-titles on TV screen so that a second player can see what the first player has "said", then voice from an animated character responding to the first player's sub-titles, then push-button response from the second player, then sub-titles to simulate second player's side of the conversation so that the first player can see what the second player has "said".

A similar dialog would follow in the same scene or in the next scene with different words. By definition, each scene change involves a substantial change in background or a change to another full-screen character and hence requires substantially different video (not just lip movements or showing the same background at different views or angles). Each scene should have several exchanges of dialog which require only minimal video changes such as head and lip movements. The video (both background and characters) may be rapidly changing and these changes may be the same every time a scene is repeated. But the voice sounds should be different and characters should say different things each time a scene is repeated.

Player-controlled characters say whatever the human player chooses to have them say, but non-player characters should also be programmed to say many different alternative things depending on what a player or player-controlled character has just "said". A scene may loop a dozen times with a non-player character saying something different each time and the alternative responses for each human player being different each time around the loop.

Menus showing two or three or four phrases to say are better than the old keyword-keyword method used in many role-playing games because menus do not force each player to guess about what can be said. Guessing is fine for puzzle games, but is quite disrupting in role-playing games. Trial and error slows down the pace of the game, especially for other players, and weakens or destroys the suspense and emotional involvement that captivates a game player.

Hand-held display units are preferable to displaying menus on the TV screen, because in two-person games the menu displayed to one player may be different from the other player's menu. Part of the fun comes from not knowing what choices the other player has. Also, TV screen menus disrupt the illusion that a player is talking with a real TV character. Hence, the preferred embodiment of my invention makes use of hand-held menu display units with one push-button for each menu item and echo voices to avoid sub-titles on the TV screen.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

Referring to FIG. 1, in one embodiment of this invention a video game system generates for display on a TV screen 11 an animated picture sequence to two human game players. Human players 10 and 12 take turns selecting a phrase or sentence to "say" to a character or characters on a TV screen who then talk back responsively. In this example it is player 10's turn. Player 12's hand-held controller 47 is blank, indicating that she cannot say anything at this moment. The TV screen shows two animated characters traveling in a boat or other vehicle. The characters are talking non-player characters, i.e. players can "talk" to the characters who will then talk back, but players cannot put words in their mouth, in this example. Each human player holds a hand-held controller with three push buttons next to a liquid-crystal display 13, shown enlarged in FIG. 1 for clarity.

As the boat scene begins, the video game system displays two or three or more alternative responses on display 13 or TV screen or other display device. While player 10 is deciding which button to press, a linking picture sequence (not shown) continues to show the same boat scene with one character looking back from the boat as if looking at player 10 standing on the dock. Player 10 selects one of the displayed responses (in this example "WHERE ARE YOU GOING?") which is then echoed as voice sounds or is displayed as sub-titles on the TV screen so that player 12 will know what player 10 has just said to an animated character. This character 18 answers responsively with voice sounds: "TO THE ISLAND," after which a second character 17 responds with "WE'LL BE THERE AN HOUR," in response to what character 18 just said. In the preferred embodiment the game system generates a voice to echo the words selected by player 10 so that player 12 hears what player 10 has "said" to the animated character. When it is player 12's turn, player 12's hand-

held display will then show alternative words (not shown in FIG. 1) that she can "say" in response to what animated character 17 or 18 has said. Thus a three-way or four-way dialog can be simulated.

When alternative words or other verbal expressions are shown on LCD display 13, the words may be blinked a few times or display 13 may be flashed by alternating black and white a few times to attract a player's attention and prompt him to make a choice. Or a small light-emitting diode may be blinked on and off a few times as a prompting signal.

Before each game begins, display 13 may show identifying information for each player-controlled character so that each human player may select which character he or she wants to play. Alternatively, each player-controlled character may be shown on TV screen 11 and the question asked "Who wants to play this character?" for each character shown. The game system then records which hand-held controller responds so that later that character's words to say will be shown on display 13 only for the player who is playing that character (in this example player 10). A human player may also choose to play a player-controlled character that need not always be on the TV screen, but who may be off-screen (standing on the dock in FIG. 1), and can carry on a dialog with on-screen characters. Each echo voice is the voice of a player-controlled character.

Referring to FIG. 2, in another embodiment of the invention, a video game system generates for display on a TV screen 11 an animated picture sequence having two or more animated talking characters 17 and 18. In this example, character 17 is a player-controlled character that human player 12 controls. Player 12 plays the role of character 17 and can talk to character 18 and other characters in the game through character 17. Player 12 holds a hand-held controller 47 with three push buttons next to a liquid-crystal display 13, shown enlarged in FIG. 2 for clarity. The game system displays three alternative responses on display 13. Player 12 selects one of the displayed responses (in this example "KISS ME AGAIN") with push button 14. Echo voice sounds 15 for character 17 then say the words selected from display 13. The words are directed at character 18 whose voice sounds 16 then respond to character 17.

The two animated characters 17 and 18 may respond in reverse sequence, that is, the non-player character 18 may say his line first so that the player-controlled character 17 can respond as ordered by human player 12. For example, after player 12 selects "KISS ME AGAIN", character 18 may say "WHAT DO YOU WANT TO DO?" a prerequisite sentence that is not one of the displayed alternatives, then character 17 can respond with "KISS ME AGAIN" which is responsive to what character 18 has just said. Such reversals can make the dialog seem more spontaneous.

Echo voices or sub-titles may also be used to express unspoken thoughts or the thoughts of non-speaking beings such as babies or animals, or inanimate objects such as a thinking rock. Cloud balloon 19 represents an unspoken thought of character 18 in FIG. 2 which is sounded (with mouth not moving) in response to spoken sentence 15 of character 17. Voice sounds for unspoken thoughts may be electronically altered to indicate to players that a voice is not a normal spoken voice. For example, unspoken thoughts can be given a hollow or tremulous sound or a whispering sound by electroni-

cally or digitally editing voice sound data before converting to audio.

Referring to FIG. 3, when characters 17 and 18 perform an activity such as kissing, one of the characters 5 may speak (with moving mouth) or think unspoken thoughts (sounded with unmoving or unsynchronized mouth) as in cloud balloon 29, responsive to the action being shown or to what was said or done in the prior sequence shown in FIG. 2 or in response to a phrase 10 selected from display 13.

Referring to FIG. 4, in another embodiment of this invention a video game system generates for display on a TV screen an animated picture sequence showing a character 30 hanging by his fingers from a ledge on the 15 outside of a building. His friends on the roof have thrown him a rope which is not long enough to reach character 30. This ledge-hanging situation sets up the next scene shown in FIG. 5 in which two animated characters exchange dialog with one or two human 20 players and with each other regarding character 30.

Referring to FIG. 5, animated picture sequences 21, 25, and 28 are parts of one roof scene in which two talking characters discuss how to rescue the character 25 in FIG. 4. One or two human players participate in the 25 conversation by "saying" words or phrases or sentences to the animated characters who then answer responsively and ask questions or make remarks that lead to the next input by a player. The alternatives shown on display 13 are suggested solutions to the problem posed 30 in sentence 20. When the human player 10 presses button 14 next to "Call emergency", character 17 responds by asking question 23 to character 18 who responds with question 24 directed at the human player. Question 24 is also accompanied by display of a new menu of 35 alternative actions 26. When a player presses the button next to "Slide down the rope", character 17 comments on this choice of action with sentence 27 in sequence 28. Thus a simulated verbal dialog can continue through a 40 branching sequence of exchanges of words within the same scene and the selected action may set up the next scene in a branching sequence of scenes.

Referring to FIG. 6, in another embodiment of this invention a video game system generates for display on a TV screen an animated picture sequence 31 and 32. 45 The picture sequence has one scene showing a burning car in the background and a frightened woman 17 in the foreground. During part 31 of the sequence the woman's voice 15 says "Please help me! My mother's trapped in the car!" The game then displays two or 50 more alternative actions on hand-held display 13 or on the TV screen or other display device. The human player 10 selects one of the displayed actions (such as "Pry the door open") and presses the corresponding push button 14 or equivalent. While the player is deciding which button to press, a linking picture sequence (not shown) continues to show the same scene with the woman looking anxiously at the player. When the player selects an action response, part 32 of the animated sequence continues showing the same burning car scene with the woman's voice 16 answering responsively, for example: "I tried to, but I can't get it open" as in voice balloon 16.

Selecting a response by pushing a button 14 can result in a change to a different scene, or as in this FIG. 6 example the scene remains the same while the branching dialog continues. Each of the three alternative responses on display 13 will result in a different answer by 65 animated character 17. The animated sequences 31 and

32 are generated by the video game system by overlaying three moving pictures: (1) the background sequence showing the burning car with flames continually flickering, (2) a sprite or mosaic of sprites showing the woman character 17 moving in a natural manner against the background (This motion can be the same regardless of the dialog) and (3) mouth and other facial sprites selected (by table lookup) by the game system to be approximately lip-synchronized with voice sounds 15 and 16.

Since the player's response time is variable, sequence 31 or 32 with a closed mouth sprite should cycle continually until a button 14 response is made or until a time limit is reached, at which time a prompting picture sequence with words such as "Hurry! Hurry!" may be sounded and displayed with moving mouth sprites. The burning car can be any object such as a damaged bus, airplane, boat, or building that provides a danger situation.

Referring to FIG. 7, the game system generates for display on the TV screen an animated sequence showing one or more hands 36 simulating the hands of a human player performing an action. Sequence 33 begins a new scene resulting from the manual selection made by player 10 in FIG. 6 of a tool to be used in FIG. 7. In this example, animated sequence 33 shows a hand holding pipe 35 or a fire extinguisher or other such tool while the human player whose real hand 10 is illustrated pressing button 14 selects one of the alternative actions shown on display 13. Note that display 13 in FIG. 7 shows alternative actions which would result in scene changes, but display 13 in FIG. 6 shows alternative words or phrases to say to animated character 17 in a common scene followed by a scene change. In FIG. 7, pressing button 14 to select "Pry the door open" results in picture sequence 34 showing hands 36 prying open the car door with pipe 35.

Referring to FIG. 8, a flowchart illustrates the distinction between branching dialog and branching scenes. For example, at dialog branch point 60 a player is presented with two or more alternatives to choose from which correspond to the menu of verbal expressions displayed on hand-held controller 48 in FIGS. 1-7. Each of the alternative selections will result in a different verbal response 61 or 62 by one or more of the animated characters, but does not result in a scene change in this instance. However, the alternatives at branch point 63 in FIG. 8 will result in a scene change, either to scene 65 or to scene 66. Branch point 69 may result in either a scene change to scene 67 or a dialog branch depending on a player's selection. Dialog branching in each scene provides a large variety of possible dialog sequences without duplicating the animated picture data for each dialog branch. New animated picture data is needed only whenever branching to a new scene occurs. If player 10 in FIG. 6 selects the first of the three alternative actions shown on display 13, the scene changes to the pipe scene in FIG. 7 which corresponds to response 68 in FIG. 8. Response 68 includes voice sounds 16 of character 17 in FIG. 6 followed by a scene change and actions by a second character 36 in FIG. 7.

Referring to FIG. 9, video game system 42 is connected by cable 44 to a television or video monitor 11 and to one or more hand-held control units 48 and 47 or portable game system 46, each having three push buttons 14 next to a liquid-crystal display 13 showing a variable menu of verbal expressions. Infra-red or radio

signals may be used instead of cables. System 42 includes a disk reader that reads digital data from a CD-ROM disk 43, or write-once disk or card or other medium containing digital data from which system 42 generates animated picture signals; Disk 43 also includes digital data of compressed audio for voice and other sounds, synchronizing data, and digitized words for display on units 48 and 47. Portable game system 46 with appropriate ROM program cartridge may substitute for units 48 and 47. Cable 45 connects game system 42 to display unit 48, 46 or 47 and transmits alternative prompting words or other verbal expressions for display. Cable 45 also transmits push-button 14 selection signals to system 42.

If portable game system 46 has only one or two available push-buttons, selection from among responses shown on display 13 may be done as shown in FIG. 7 by pressing push-button 14 multiple times to position a pointer 49, cursor, or other such indicator next to (or on) a selected sentence.

Referring to FIG. 10, in one embodiment of this invention a video game system generates on a video screen 11 several sequences of animated pictures 21, 25, and 28 showing three talking characters engaged in a rescue activity. The characters have distinctive voices. As sequence 21 begins, characters 18 and 30 are in a dangerous situation and character 17 is trying to rescue them. Character 17 speaks words represented in voice balloon 20 commenting on the rescue activity. A human player 12 in this example holds a hand-held controller 47 with three push buttons 14 positioned next to corresponding menu items on a liquid-crystal display 13. Two or more alternative response sentences or phrases are shown on display 13, each being associated with one of the three push buttons 14. The hand of human player 12 is shown pressing one of the buttons 14 that selects one of the alternative sentences to be spoken by character 30.

While human player 12 is deciding which button to press, a linking picture sequence (not shown) continues to show the same scene with the characters trying to pull up on the rope or trying to climb up the rope.

When player 12 selects one of the displayed alternative response sentences that calls for an action shown in a different scene, branching to the next scene occurs beginning in this example with animated picture sequence 25. The selected sentence is sounded in the voice of player-controlled character 30 who repeats the words selected by human player 12. These voice sounds are represented in balloon 23 (in this example "GRAB THE ROPE TOM"). Tom is character 18 who is shown in sequence 21 hanging dangerously onto an ankle of character 30. After character 30 says the selected sentence in balloon 23, character 18 grabs hold of the rope and then responds in his voice with the words "I'VE GOT IT" which are the preprogrammed words for the selected sentence. These voice sounds of character 18 are represented in balloon 24. The actions of character 18 are the preprogrammed actions for the selected sentence. If human player 12 had selected a different one of the alternative sentences, a different scene would result and character 18 would have behaved differently and spoken different response words.

The video game system next generates an animated picture sequence showing character 18 climbing the rope. This climbing sequence is not shown in the drawings. When character 18 reaches character 17 in sequence 28, character 17 says in her voice "HOLD MY

ARM" (in balloon 27) and the rescue activity proceeds. Thus, the animated characters perform or attempt to perform actions and talk about these actions while both the actions and voice sounds are controlled directly or indirectly by a human player or players. The words spoken by character 17 may also be selected by a human player from a second menu (not shown) of alternative sentences for her to say. This human player may be a second player 10 as shown in FIG. 5.

After the end of sequence 28, the game system generates another animated sequence, then another sequence, then another sequence, etc. in which a human player controls, directly or indirectly, character actions and voice sounds as described above for FIG. 10.

Referring to FIG. 11 which is a block diagram of a special-purpose apparatus for performing some of the video game illustrated in FIG. 1, the apparatus performs steps 1 through 7 in sequence, so that the animated picture sequence on the television or video screen 11 alternates between two characters in this example. In step 1, animated picture generator 51 generates a video of RF signal for display on video screen 11 of an animated picture from digitized animated character data stored in memory 70 of a first talking character. In step 2, hand-held controller 48 displays on the liquid-crystal display 13 several alternative sentences or other verbal expressions from data read via line 72 from memory 52 storing the alternative sentences. In step 3, one of the push buttons 14 generates a selection signal (indicated by one of lines 53) selecting a sentence from among the alternative sentences in memory 52 and also selects the corresponding (indicated by dotted lines) digitized voice recordings from memory 57 and 58. In step 4, voice signal generator 54 generates a signal for output as first voice sounds from the selected digitized voice recording (via line 73) in memory 57 that expresses or responds to the words displayed on controller 48. In step 5, animated picture generator 55 generates a signal for display on video screen 11 of an animated picture from digitized animated character data stored in memory 71 of a second talking character. In step 6, voice signal generator 56 generates a signal for second voice sounds from the selected digitized voice recording (via line 74) in memory 58 that respond to the words generated by voice signal generator 54. In step 7, a new set of alternative sentences from disk or memory 59 is loaded into memory 52, 57 and 58 and the sequence of steps begins again with step 1.

To allow each background scene to be used with different animated characters who can move around against the background scene, the digital animation data for the background scene should be stored separately from the digital animation data for each character. Similarly, to allow each character to say many different sentences without a scene change, the digitized voice data should be independent of the animation data. In the preferred embodiment, animated character video, voice sound sequences and prompting word sequences are generated independently from separately stored digital data. Dialog data that is not used in one scene may be used later in a different scene with the same or different characters. The voice data may consist of sequences of codes or compressed digital recordings of words, phrases, word segments or phonemes in several distinctive voices so that each character can speak thousands of preprogrammed words or sentences. Similarly, the digital data for each animated character's body may be stored separately from sprite data for moving lips, facial

expressions, and gestures, so that each character and its distinctive voice can be lip-synchronized with different mouth movements depending on which branch the dialog takes. The digital data for each animated character may also combine body, lips, expressions, gestures and voice sounds.

When a human player presses one of the buttons 14 (FIGS. 1, 2, 5, 6 or 7) the game system may generate a voice sound speaking the selected sentence as a substitute for the player's side of the dialog. The animated character then "responds" as if the generated voice sounds had been spoken by the human player. Because the player selects the words which are actually sounded, he will quickly adjust to the fact that the spoken words he hears for his side of the dialog are initiated by his fingers rather than his vocal cords. This "echo" voice repeating the selected words is important for games with multiple human players so that each player will hear what each of the other players has "said" to on-screen characters. Pushing one of the buttons 14 selects both a simulated verbal response to the words previously spoken by an animated character and also selects a new dialog sequence that corresponds to the simulated verbal response shown on display 13. The selected dialog sequence includes the face and voice of the animated character speaking words which are responsive to the player's selected verbal response.

Alternatively, sub-titles such as illustrated on TV screen 11 in FIG. 1 may be used instead of echo voices and be displayed on a TV screen or on a hand-held display unit as a substitute for the player's side of the dialog.

The illustrated embodiments of the invention make use of the hand-held controller 48 having one push-button 14 for each menu item on display 13 and echo voices to avoid sub-titles on the video or television screen. Alternatively, the menus may be shown on the video or television screen instead of on the hand-held display and be selected by players using hand-held controllers 47 and 48 that lack displays.

Each character can be an animated cartoon, digitized live action, analog live action, a sprite or the like, and be player controlled or not. The term "verbal expression" means any word, words, phrase, sentence, question, expletive, curse, keyword, combination of keywords, symbol, icon, or any meaningful human voice sound such as "huh?" or "hmmm" or laughter or scream. The word kissing is used herein to mean simulated touching of one animated character's mouth to another animated character's mouth or other body part.

Although I have described the preferred embodiments of my invention with a degree of particularity, it is understood that the present disclosure has been made only by way of example and that equivalent steps and components may be substituted and design details changed without departing from the spirit and scope of my invention.

I claim:

1. An electronic system for simulating voice conversations between animated video characters, the system comprising:

(a) means for digitally storing voice sound data representing a plurality of sentences, phrases, word segments or phonemes for two or more talking animated characters;

(b) means for digitally storing a preprogrammed branching dialog between said animated charac-

ters, each branch comprising a plurality of alternative verbal expressions;

(c) means for generating a video or RF signal representing images of said animated characters for display on a video screen;

(d) cable means for sending to a hand-held portable game apparatus variable menus of alternatively selectable verbal expressions, each expression corresponding to a branch in said dialog;

(e) cable means for receiving from said hand-held portable game apparatus a manually initiated signal representing a selected verbal expression in a menu of said verbal expressions, thereby selecting a branch in the dialog;

(f) means for digitally reading from said catalog of voices voice sound data that corresponds to said selected verbal expression for the voice of one of said characters;

(g) means for generating an audio signal from said voice sound data representing the voice of a character speaking said selected verbal expression; and

(h) said hand-held portable game apparatus comprising:

(1) two or more manually operable push buttons;

(2) a liquid crystal display positioned near said push buttons for displaying said variable menu of verbal expressions;

(3) a ROM program cartridge storing a program of instructions for performing the following sequence of steps in said portable game system:

a. reading said variable menu of verbal expressions from said cable;

b. displaying said menu on said liquid crystal display;

c. receiving from one of said push buttons a manually initiated selection signal; and

d. transmitting said manually initiated selection signal on said cable;

thereby selecting from said digital storing means the next branch of the branching dialog and voice sound data corresponding to the manually selected menu expression.

2. A method of electronically simulating voice conversations between an on-screen talking animated character and an offscreen talking character, the words of the characters being selected by two corresponding human players, comprising the steps of:

(a) digitally storing a catalog of distinctive voices for at least two talking characters, each in the form of voice sound data representing a plurality of sentences, phrases, word segments or phonemes;

(b) digitally storing a preprogrammed branching dialog between the on-screen character and the off-screen character, each branch comprising a plurality of alternative verbal expressions;

(c) generating a video signal representing an image of said on-screen character for display on a video screen;

(d) displaying on a first hand-held controller apparatus a first set of alternatively selectable verbal expressions, each corresponding to a branch in said dialog;

(e) receiving from said first hand-held controller a manually initiated signal representing a first selected verbal expression in said first set of verbal expressions, thereby selecting a branch in the dialog;

(f) digitally reading from said catalog of voices first voice sound data that corresponds to said first selected verbal expression for the voice of said on-screen character;

(g) generating an audio signal from said first voice sound data representing the voice of said on-screen character speaking said first selected verbal expression;

(h) displaying on a second hand-held controller apparatus a second set of alternatively selectable verbal expressions that follows next for said off-screen character in the selected branch of the dialog;

(i) receiving from said second hand-held controller a manually initiated signal representing a second selected verbal expression in said second set of verbal expressions, thereby selecting a next branch in the dialog;

(j) digitally reading from said catalog of voices second voice sound data that corresponds to said second selected verbal expression for the voice of said off-screen character; and

(k) generating an audio signal from said second voice sound data representing the voice of said off-screen character speaking said second selected verbal expression.

3. A method of electronically simulating voice conversations between at least two on-screen talking animated characters and an off-screen talking character, comprising the steps of:

(a) digitally storing a catalog of distinctive voices for at least three talking characters, each in the form of voice sound data representing a plurality of sentences, phrases, word segments or phonemes;

(b) digitally storing a preprogrammed branching dialog between a first on-screen character and a second on-screen character and an off-screen character, each branch comprising a plurality of alternative verbal expressions;

(c) generating a video signal representing an image of said first and second on-screen characters for display on a video screen;

(d) displaying on a first hand-held controller apparatus a first set of alternatively selectable verbal expressions, each corresponding to a branch in said dialog;

(e) receiving from said first hand-held controller a manually initiated signal representing a first selected verbal expression in said first set of verbal expressions, thereby selecting a branch in the dialog;

(f) digitally reading from said catalog of voices first voice sound data that corresponds to said first selected verbal expression for the voice of said off-screen character;

(g) generating an audio signal from said first voice sound data representing the voice of said off-screen character speaking said first selected verbal expression;

(h) digitally reading from said catalog of voices second voice sound data for the voice of said first on-screen character speaking the verbal expression that follows next in the selected branch of the dialog; generating an audio signal from said second voice sound data representing the voice of said first on-screen character;

(j) displaying on a second hand-held controller apparatus a second set of alternatively selectable verbal expressions that follows next for said second on-

screen character in the selected branch of the dialog;

(k) receiving from said second hand-held controller a manually initiated signal representing a second selected verbal expression in said second set of verbal expressions, thereby selecting a next branch in the dialog;

(l) digitally reading from said catalog of voices third voice sound data that corresponds to said second selected verbal expression for the voice of said second on-screen character; and

(m) generating an audio signal from said third voice sound data representing the voice of said second on-screen character speaking said second selected verbal expression.

4. A method of electronically simulating voice conversations between at least two talking characters, comprising the steps of:

(a) digitally storing a catalog of distinctive voices for at least two talking characters, each in the form of voice sound data representing a plurality of sentences, phrases, word segments or phonemes;

(b) digitally storing a preprogrammed branching dialog between a first animated character and a second animated character, each branch comprising a plurality of alternative verbal expressions;

(c) generating a video signal representing an image of said first and second characters for display on a video screen;

(d) displaying on a first hand-held controller apparatus a first set of alternatively selectable verbal expressions, each corresponding to a branch in said dialog;

(e) receiving from said first hand-held controller a manually initiated signal representing a first se-

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lected verbal expression in said first set of verbal expressions, thereby selecting a branch in the dialog;

(f) digitally reading from said catalog of voices first voice sound data that corresponds to said first selected verbal expression for the voice of said first character;

(g) generating an audio signal from said first voice sound data representing the voice of said first character speaking said first selected verbal expression;

(h) digitally reading from said catalog of voices second voice sound data for the voice of said second character speaking the verbal expression that follows next in the selected branch of the dialog;

(i) generating an audio signal from said second voice sound data representing the voice of said second character;

(j) displaying on a second hand-held controller apparatus a second set of alternatively selectable verbal expressions that follows next for said second character in the selected branch of the dialog;

(k) receiving from said second hand-held controller a manually initiated signal representing a second selected verbal expression in said second set of verbal expressions, thereby selecting a next branch in the dialog;

(l) digitally reading from said catalog of voices third voice sound data that corresponds to said second selected verbal expression for the voice of said second character; and

(m) generating an audio signal from said third voice sound data representing the voice of said second character speaking said second selected verbal expression.

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